



**Cornell University**

**John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines**

**Document Title:**      **Stretching the Evidence**

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**Course:**                **English 1147**

**Course Title:**        **The Mystery in the Story**

**Year of Award:**      **Spring 2012**

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winner

## Spring 2012 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org) for more information about cc licensing.)

The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, May 18. No exceptions can be made.

## Spring 2012 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please Print Clearly. Do not staple. Use paper clips only.~

Instructor's name

AARON ROSENBERG

Department

ENGLISH Course # and title ENGL FWS 1147-104 - THE MYSTERY IN THE STORY

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hara ([dlo1@cornell.edu](mailto:dlo1@cornell.edu)) in the knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

"STRETCHING THE EVIDENCE"

Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature



Date

5/11/12

Aaron Rosenberg  
5/11/2012  
FWS 1147—The Mystery in the Story  
Handout Exercise Application

### “Stretching the Evidence” Rationale

Student writing often turns a corner when it begins to synthesize unique arguments with appropriate textual evidence. Some common problems found in student essays stem from weak or nonspecific arguments, or from theses that do not propose a debatable claim. These problems can be exacerbated by a tendency to use evidence as plot exposition—in other words, choosing examples that simply demonstrate what happens in the text, rather than arguing for their significance.

“Stretching the Evidence” seeks to circumvent these issues by requiring writing that makes far-fetched or counterintuitive claims about a text. By starting with an unusual argument, students learn to take risks and to apply critical skills without restating the plot. Once a debatable claim is in place, students work hard to find examples from the text that will substantiate their interpretation. This process emphasizes the extent to which evidence *always* demands critical analysis, and cannot be used as “filler,” even when arguments (particularly those used in future essays) appear more conventional.

Beyond this, “Stretching the Evidence” is an exercise designed to be fun and rewarding. I use this assignment early in the semester. Students may find their writing voices for the first time as they step outside of their comfort zones, and follow-up discussions in class can lead to thought-provoking and unexpected points of interest. Many of my students have remarked that this was their favorite writing exercise.

This handout applies to two Arthur Conan Doyle short stories, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” and “A Scandal in Bohemia”, but could be easily adapted to other works.

English 1147-104  
The Mystery in the Story  
Rosenberg  
Due 2/17/12

### "Stretching the Evidence"

For this assignment, please write a strong paragraph that makes a far-fetched claim concerning "A Scandal in Bohemia" or "The Adventure of the Speckled Band". Make sure that you express the claim in the form of an argument, using a clear topic sentence. You should also use evidence from the text to support a radical interpretation; the overall goal of the assignment is to use the textual material to make a claim that is perhaps a difficult one to sustain.

For example, one might argue that Dr. Watson is merely a figure of Sherlock Holmes's imagination—since we never really "see" Watson doing things without Holmes, is it possible to claim that Watson is merely a projection of Sherlock's unstable mind? In this interpretation, one might point out that Watson serves as Holmes's socially acceptable alter ego—a Jekyll to his Hyde.

Please print the paragraph and bring two copies to class. Remember: the more unconventional the claim, the better.